

prepared piano by John Cage were also heard. Because of their extremely refined and delicate scale of volume, these pieces did not register with the full impact they give in a small room. Here Cage begins to slip in occasional uses of unprepared tones and shows interest in tonal organization. Several of the pieces have a folkish quality, and one simply glitters with swift and impetuous harplike sweeps.

Two preludes and a *Portrait* by Paul Bowles, which were written at different periods, made one realize that his works of ten years ago are quite as effective as his recent ones. Bowles is obviously the Handel kind of composer who shows his true self early in his career and avoids the "period" developments. Two more of his piano pieces, *La Cuelga* and *Carretera de Estepona*, were played by Hazel Griggs. And Carolyn and Earle Blakeslee sang the lovely *Acht Kanonen* by Hindemith, which are entirely simple and touching essays in the canon form on excellent texts in the manner of epigrams.

A recent program of the ISCM Forum Group included Ben Weber's clear and amiable *Five Bagatelles* for piano; their twelve-tone idiom is simple and their expression agreeable. Kurt List's *Variations on a Theme by Alban Berg* (the opening phrase of the *Lyrical Suite*) tends in several sections to motor paralysis. Though utterly undramatic in outline, this work still has a real and communicative lyric life. It is rather like a placid pond with only slight ripples on the surface which yet reflects a surprising amount of sky. Louise Talma's *Three Invocations to the Blessed Virgin* were in a bright Ravelian style, Jeannette Siegel's *Piano Sonata* in a grim biting manner with little sonority. Vivian Fine's *Three Pieces* for violin and piano and Normand Lockwood's *Seventh String Quartet* were each eclectic, Miss Fine's selectedly so (mostly Shostakovich and Prokofiev) and Lockwood's abandonedly so.

Lou Harrison

MILHAUD'S ORPHEE AND THE BELLS

TWO dramatic works by Darius Milhaud, separated in their dates of composition by more than two decades, were presented at the University of Chicago on April 26. The earlier piece, the chamber opera *Les malheurs d'Orphée*, had been presented only once before in this country, nearly twenty years ago in a Pro Musica concert in New York. The more recent work, the ballet *The Bells*, received its world premiere on this occasion.

Les malheurs d'Orphée is one of those rare and desirable pieces of music which offers substantiation for Stravinsky's provocative claim that a composer is likely to do his best work when he prescribes a severely limiting problem for himself. With an economical and sometimes almost tele-

graphic libretto by Armand Lunel which suggests situations and emotions without developing them, and with an orchestra of a dozen and an equal number of singers, Milhaud has built a full-scale lyric drama. For despite its startling brevity (three acts unfold in less than three-quarters of an hour) *Les malheurs d'Orphée* commits no errors of omission, and achieves an emotional release equal to that of many grander, and externally more important, operas.

A more classical eye might find a few traces of the familiar legend of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Lunel libretto; to me it seemed a brand-new story, whatever its hidden source of inspiration may have been. Orpheus is the town apothecary of some timeless and placeless village. His favorite clients, however, are not the townspeople, but an endearing group of wild animals – a fox, a bear, a wolf and a boar. He falls in love with an itinerant gypsy girl, Eurydice, and he takes her to a hut in the mountains to escape the wrath of her parents, who disapprove the marriage of a gypsy girl outside the tribe. Here Eurydice wastes away and dies, cared for by the tenderly sympathetic animals, and mourned by Orpheus, whose apothecary's skill cannot save the one he loves. It is a pathetic, not a tragic, story, enveloped in a mood of sweet sadness and poetic half-lights.

Such an attenuated tale might have sunk into a morass of sentimentality if the composer had tried to dilate upon the poet's gently imaginative treatment. Milhaud, however, adopted an absolutely opposite course. He turns the libretto into an almost rigid series of conventional set pieces – arias, duos, ensembles for the animals. The construction of each act is more formal than in the case of Gluck, for he does not even allow himself the freedom of extended passages of recitative. Musically the opera is a series of abstracted and crystallized sentiments, arranged in a pattern required by the nature of the total work of art. Because *Les malheurs d'Orphée* does not seek to reduce a delicate fantasy to the level of obvious truth represented in realistic modern opera, it attains a more believable truth of its own. It is a work of pure artistic invention; and its audience will always be limited to those who prefer not to confuse the proper artificiality of art with the photographic imitation of everyday life.

On the purely technical side, *Les malheurs d'Orphée* is one of Milhaud's most expert works. One wonders why any composer troubles to write for a large orchestra when a small one can be commanded with such richness of nuance and such apposite theatricality. The rhythmic vitality is striking, in its happy resolution of the conflict between fluent and natural French prosody and the complexities of musical meter and syncopation. If the harmonic idiom is continually dissonant, it is also unfailingly intelligible and well related to the inflection and quality of the melodic line. The score has a number of unforgettable passages, the most stirring perhaps the im-

passioned lament accompanying the cortège in which the animals bear away the lifeless body of Eurydice.

In contrast to so choice a work as this, *The Bells* seems a little brash and extroverted. I should not want to apply the harsh term opportunism to Milhaud's attitude in composing the new score; let us rather say that he opened his mind to the possibility of turning out a piece to suit the broad purposes of the Ballet Russe, which has subsequently proved the wisdom of his attitude by purchasing the score – and also, of course, Ruth Page's resourceful and well calculated choreography.

The Bells' scenario is from Poe's familiar poem. Citing various lines about the golden, silver and iron bells, the plot (if that is the right word for it) traces the experience of a bride and bridegroom through a life cycle passing from initial happiness to disillusionment and destruction. The denouement is brought on by a retinue of demoniac figures headed by the King of the Ghouls, who seemed originally to be – whatever the Ballet Russe may make of him – a symbol of homosexuality, as he lures the Bridegroom away from the Bride. In a final chaotic episode the last aspect of stability disappears when a church, complete with steeple and bells, falls into a heap of rubble in the midst of the bacchanalian group.

If you trouble to reread the poem, you will find that Miss Page's scenario, apart from any literal interpretation of the symbolism, offers an excellent parallel to its emotional course. It serves furthermore as a good presentation of Poe's special brand of romantic melancholy, in which the greatest beauty is to be found in death. It is not often that a ballet based upon a literary theme so successfully avoids mere obvious translation into pantomime.

The trouble with Milhaud's score is not that it is bad music, for it is not. On the contrary, it is music of admirable invention, spirit and drive, handsomely conceived in terms of the needs of dancers. But it misses the quality of literary understanding which lifts *Les malheurs d'Orphée* to so high a level. Two possibilities were open – to catch and enhance the Poe mood of coldly passionless morbidity, or to oppose it effectively by some well planned musical counteragent. Milhaud followed neither of these courses, and consequently wrote no more than a resounding, energetic and interesting piece of utility music.

Cecil M. Smith

COMPOSERS' FELLOWSHIP MEETS IN DETROIT

THE first congress of the Fellowship of American Composers, Detroit, May 6-10, induced a mixed reaction. In general it was a success, but the faulty administration of musical and practical details left too much to be desired. Moreover the intent of the meeting seemed at this session un-